

SGAP: the story of Arthur Swaby and the Society for Growing Australian Plants

by John Walter

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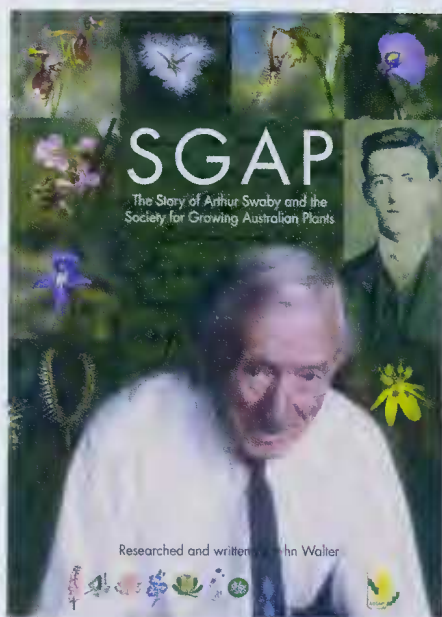
The Society for Growing Australian Plants (SGAP) is perhaps Australia's premier organisation committed to the advocacy of the conservation of Australian plants and their use in horticulture. There can be few people seeking to establish a native plant garden, or simply to grow indigenous plants on their suburban blocks, who have not sought information from the Society and its publications as to what plants are suitable for their circumstances. From its small beginnings in Victoria, the Society has grown to include branches in all states and a vigorous network of study groups, the attention of which is concentrated largely on specific genera. The Society celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 2007. To mark this milestone it has published *SGAP: the story of Arthur Swaby and the Society for Growing Australian Plants*, written by John Walter.

This book is more than a history of the Society. It starts with the early enthusiasts of using Australian plants in horticulture, stretching back into the nineteenth century: those who wrote about it, established native plant nurseries and advocated the use of Australian plants in public gardens. Well-known people such as Thistle Harris, Edwin Ashby, Edward Pescott and George Althofer are introduced and their early contribution outlined. The foundation of the Society is thus placed against this background of a dedicated group of people passionate about the merits of Australian plants. In establishing the Society its founders were building on the work of these forerunners. They were also attempting to provide a formal means by which the wider community could be encouraged to grow native plants. The book is not just a history of the Society, but also of the native plant movement in the broader history of Australian horticulture.

The Field Naturalists Club of Victoria was central to the foundation of the Society. Its founders were members of the Club, which was the seedbed of societies that for many years were in the forefront of public activities in the conservation area. Like the Society, both the Victorian National Parks Association and the Native Plants Preservation Society had their origins in committees of the Club. This book is therefore a contribution to that part of the Club's history and its participation in the wider issues of conservation, the use of Australian native plants in horticulture, revegetation, and other related fields.

In telling the story of the SGAP the author traces the paths by which the founders came to their love of Australian plants and their determination to create a society that would be a home to those who shared their interest in the native flora. While each of the founding members is given their due, the subtitle draws particular attention to Arthur Swaby as the energetic promoter of the Society. The early years, while the Society was feeling its way, were difficult, with ructions particularly over drawing up a constitution. Swaby was vigorous in promoting his ideas, using as a principal means of communication the popular gardening magazine *Your Garden*. The picture emerges of Swaby's strong desire to see his ideas carried to fruition, but also of his impatience of restraint and determination to be at the centre of things. His mistrust of office bearers eventually led to his resignation from the Society.

This is a book rich in detail. The author charts the Society's progress from its first meeting in July 1957 and its early upheavals, through the establishment of branches across Australia and the linking federal council, to the formation of the



Australian Plants Society, a nation-wide organisation with regional branches and 31 individual groups specialising in specific groups of Australian plants or aspects of their use in horticulture. (It was, in fact, Swaby's dream that the Society should be constituted with such special interest groups.) Along the way much space is devoted to the publications produced by the Society, particularly the journal *Australian Plants* and the monographs that came from both the study groups and regional groups.

In writing this book the author has made extensive use of records, particularly of the Field Naturalists Club and the Australian Plant Society, and made a detailed study of Swaby's published papers. These sources are clearly a rich lode for the historian. Walter also, by judicious use of extracts from transcripts of interviews with the people involved in the story, and their friends and family members, has brought their 'voice' to the fore and given immediacy to the narrative. There are copious illustrations from a wide variety of sources, including reproductions of letters and photographs of key people. There are six appendices, five of which contain the sort of information that is often difficult to find elsewhere: lists of office bearers; con-

tact details of state and local groups together with times and places of meetings; award winners; and active study groups. Some of Swaby's 'poetic lines' about the Grampians constitute the sixth appendix. The index is limited to names of people and some organisations. No list is provided of the archival material consulted or of the publications cited (although these can be discerned by reference to the extensive footnotes). In a work of this kind such a list of source material is considered a necessity.

Walter has brought to life an organisation that played a central part in the Australian horticultural world in the second half of the twentieth century. He has woven a story of considerable complexity, following the Society from its early uncertainties to its current pre-eminent position. The Society acted as a catalyst in popularising the use of the indigenous flora in horticulture and in bringing together many people who shared a love of Australian plants. Its publications are recognised for their high quality and authoritative information. Members of the Society advocated the use of native plants as suitable for horticulture in Australia's climatic conditions long before it was widely recognised among the general public that our traditional gardens, heavily water-dependent, were increasingly unsustainable. Walter's treatment of the history of the Society is worthy of its successes.

Helen M Cohn

Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne
Birdwood Avenue
South Yarra, Victoria 3141